

# AFRICAN YOUTH CHARTER

The adoption of the African Youth Charter by the African Union in Gambia in July is a victory for youth across the continent. SAADHNA PANDAY, who played a pivotal role in the drafting and the extensive process of validating the document since November 2005, explains what the Charter means.

## A benchmark for youth development in Africa

THE YOUTH CHARTER CREATES a legally binding framework for governments to develop supportive policies and programmes for young people, and serves to fast-track the implementation of such policies and programmes. It also provides a platform for youth to assert their rights and fulfil their responsibility of contributing to the continent's development.

This is only the first milestone along the road to advancing youth development. Much depends on governments, youth advocates, and other stakeholders to create awareness of the Charter and to lobby for its ratification and implementation.

Young people make up the largest and fastest growing proportion of Africa's general population – currently 30%. The youth population bulge is recognised as an opportunity to renew Africa's social and economic capital. Africa has a large reservoir of youthful talent and we will continue to enjoy this bonus for the next 15–20 years. But only if we give young people opportunities to realise their potential.

Young people today are the best educated in human history, with gender gaps closing steadily as girls enter education in larger numbers and stay for more years than ever before. Better health care means that many more children grow up healthier; and the spread of democracy in Africa has increased chances for young people to participate in political life and civil society.

But despite these developments and the numerous youth programmes in place across the continent, many young people still suffer

significant disadvantages. It is estimated that 130 million young people are illiterate; youth unemployment is three times higher than that among adults; and 162 million young people in sub-Saharan Africa live on less than US\$2 a day. Millions of young people find themselves without education and training, as well as the productive and purposeful use of their time. They are also easily drawn into conflict and violence.

The new-found optimism following the establishment of the African Union must filter through to youth. To achieve this, young people need a frame of reference that entrenches their value as part of the African

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society. As a result, in 2005, the African Union Commission requested the HSRC to prepare a report on the status of youth in Africa and to draft the African Youth Charter.

This was followed by national consultations with youth at country level and in May 2006 the AU convened a Youth Forum, a Youth Expert's meeting and a Ministers of Youth meeting as part of the validation process.

The Charter defines youth as individuals between 15 and 35 years of age; it outlines the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of young people, as well as the duties to be performed by signatory states, to advance their rights. The rights and duties can be

clustered into four main themes: youth participation, education and skills development, sustainable livelihoods, and health and well-being.

Within the ambit of youth participation, young people are awarded the right to actively participate in all spheres of society. In this regard, the Charter specifies that signatory states should guarantee youth participation in parliament and other decision-making processes, develop and implement comprehensive and coherent national youth policies, mainstream youth issues and establish a national youth coordinating mechanism.

In the domain of education and skills development, the Charter advocates for equal access to all levels of high quality education. Multiple forms of education are sanctioned – including formal, non-formal, informal, distance learning, and life-long learning – so as to meet the diverse needs of young people. The articles also refer to the provision of education that is relevant to the needs of contemporary society and to the adoption of pedagogy that trains young people in the use of modern information and communication technology.

Recognising that unemployment on the continent is largely a youth issue, the Charter affords young people the right to gainful employment and mandates states to focus on macroeconomic policies that lead to job creation for young men and women. In particular, states are required to develop measures to regulate the informal economy, where the majority of young people work, and to promote alternative employment ▶

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opportunities and entrepreneurship. In addition, young people have the right to be integrally involved in poverty reduction through their active participation in the design, implementation and evaluation of poverty-reduction policies and strategies.

Given the extent of the impact of HIV/AIDS on young people in Africa, the Charter places considerable emphasis on the implementation of comprehensive programmes for prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, and care and support for those living with it.

Conflict is another issue that limits developmental opportunities for many young people across the continent. The Charter mandates states to engage in capacity strengthening of young people and youth organisations in the fields of peace building, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. In addition, states are obligated to condemn armed conflict and institute all possible measures to prevent the participation, involvement, recruitment and sexual slavery of young people in this context.

Alongside the numerous rights afforded to young people, the Charter also outlines the responsibilities that young people bear towards their families, the society and the state. It is of paramount importance that young people become the custodians of their own development, partake fully in citizenship duties, and contribute towards the economic development of states and Africa as a whole. They should become the vanguards of preserving, promoting and representing Africa's cultural heritage in languages and in forms to which youth are able to relate. •

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# A HEAVY LOAD TO CARRY

## Women and rural transport

Safe movement and transport are integral parts of our daily lives, and the fact that these travel activities affect men and women differently must form part of policy-makers' agenda, write CHERYL POTGIETER, RENAY PILLAY and TUMELO MODISANE.

OVER THE LAST 10 TO 15 YEARS transport planners, economists and policy-makers have identified the differences between the travel and travel-related activities of women and men. It is increasingly recognised that transport affects men and women differently and, in rural areas especially, women carry the heavier transport burden. But few of these insights have influenced transport planning and policy-making practice. Only a few transport projects address the issue of gender and, as a result, women in many

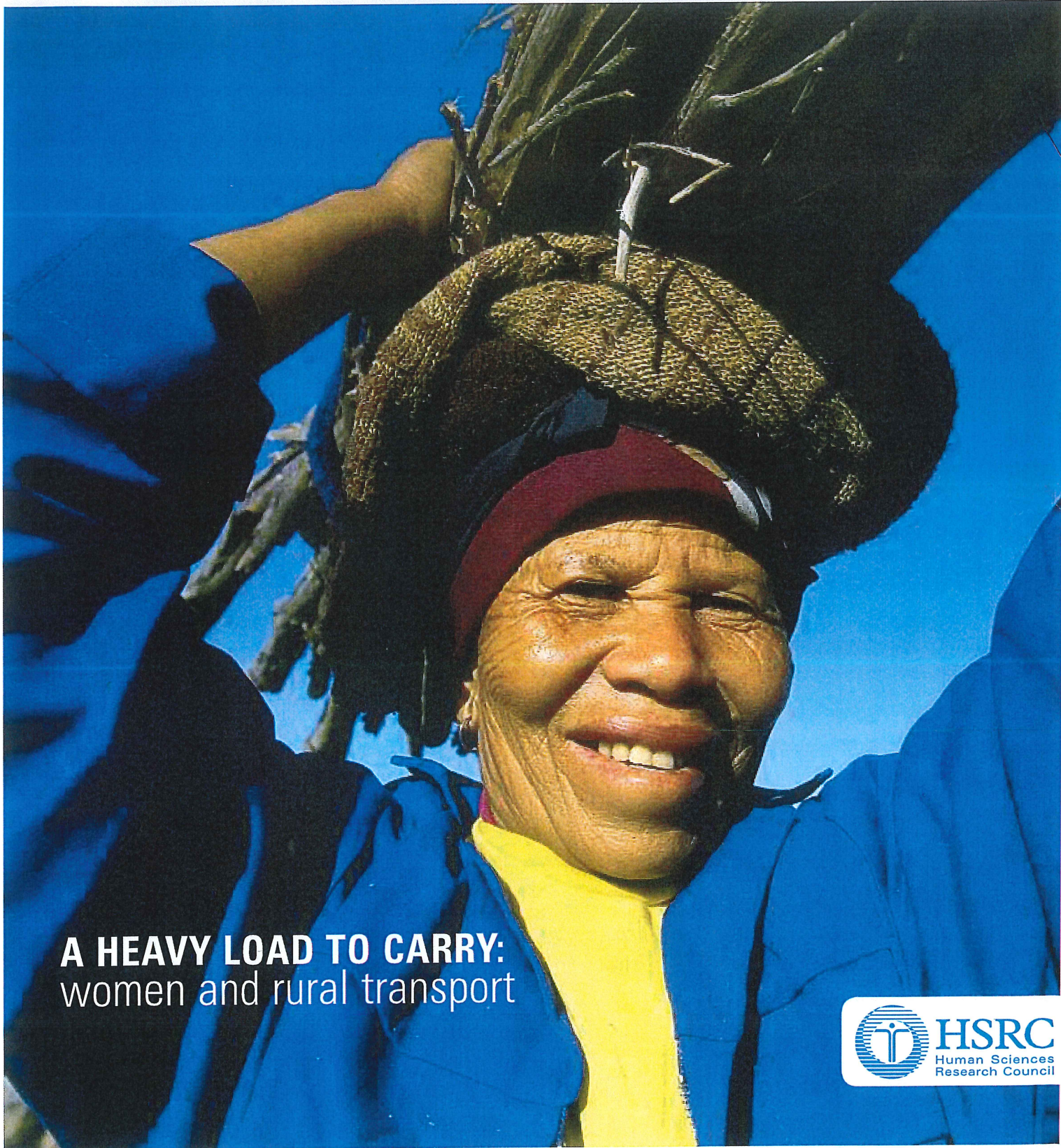
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